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THE BEN BLEWETT JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL: AN EXPERIMENT IN DEMOCRACY¹

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The Ben Blewett Junior High School was established in September, 1917, in the buildings that had been occupied by Smith Academy and the Manual Training School at St. Louis, Missouri. The buildings contained shops, gymnasium, laboratories, and library, but were planned for a total registration of about five hundred boys. There was necessary a considerable reconstruction to prepare them for fifteen hundred pupils of both sexes.

This reconstruction of the building was carried on largely while the school itself was being organized. I mention this fact because I wish to show presently that the very confusion gave rise to problems the solution of which aided materially in making our junior high school a successful social organization.

The school organization here described was worked out beforehand by Superintendent Withers, Assistant Superintendent Bryan, and the principal, but it was clearly recognized that the school was to be more than a paper scheme put into operation by the direction of the superintendent or principal. Rather was it to be a co-operative experiment in school administration wherein teachers and pupils would be encouraged to feel definite responsibility for developing their school. It is not excessive modesty, but common honesty, to say that in most of whatever successful work was done the superintendents and

¹ This article was prepared before Mr. Cox took up work with the Federal Board. It refers to the organization of the Ben Blewett Junior High School during the period of his principalship in 1917-18.

principal were mere onlookers, encouraging, applauding, counseling, but yet primarily spectators; and this was part of the deliberate plan, based on the belief that if good teaching were to be done, if spontaneity, initiative, and co-operation were to develop, the school officials must not try to pass out a ready-made scheme, but should confine themselves to planning sufficient organization so that the principles for which it was desired the junior high school to stand would be safe. A field was prepared for successful experimentation, and professional growth was assured all teachers. There was thus made possible of attainment an environment wherein each child could contribute most and develop to the maximum, physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Two fundamental purposes were before us as this preliminary organization was worked out. These may be stated thus:

1. Thirteen-year-old children differ from each other in capacity, specific abilities, interests, environments, ideals, health, and habits, and in previous school attainments; therefore the school, in making such provisions as it can to meet the needs of all its children, must not lose sight of its responsibility to each child as an individual, and to society, whose agent it is for leading the children as individuals and as groups toward the goal of social efficiency.

2. Dewey's principle that "the school cannot be a preparation for adult social life except as it reproduces within itself situations typical of social life"—"purified and idealized," he adds somewhere else—is to be followed. Such situations must, of course, be adapted to the capacities of the children with whom they deal.

THE PLAN

Even in the field of internal administration we were guided by certain convictions, though we may not dignify them by calling them principles.

1. In an experimental school organization a high degree of centralization is undesirable, if not fatal. Teachers must not be constantly following orders, or trying to please the principal by doing things "his way." They should capitalize their previous experience, their ideals, their initiative, in harmony with the principles just set forth.

2. The principal should be primarily the educational leader, inspiring, encouraging, criticizing, helping teachers and pupils, playing and working with them, understanding their problems and their points of view. Therefore all matters of mechanical administration should be put into the hands of individual teachers and their home-room groups, under the leadership of "class administrators," who have one free period a day for this purpose, and such matters as have to come to the office should be handled by the assistant principal.

3. The principal should not lose touch with the teaching problem; therefore, when possible, he should do a small amount of teaching, not to exceed one period a day.

4. Children over fourteen years of age in the seventh grade and those overage children transferred to the junior high school before they have completed the sixth grade should be placed in a rapid promotion class, wherein they would be prepared to enter their normal grades as soon as possible.

5. In subjects requiring primarily intellectual effort, the children should be so grouped that they may compete with others of similar ability. In subjects where the problems are more concrete or physical, such as drawing, music, practical arts, physical training, etc., division according to intellectual ability should be carefully avoided.

6. Since some children develop much more quickly than others, the rates of promotion should be kept flexible, so that pupils may progress at their optimum rates.

7. Since the first aim of education in a democracy is citizenship, all other aims must be subordinated to this one. This

calls for an analysis and evaluation of every element of the school organization, the distribution of time, the method and content of the curriculum, the attitude and personality of the teachers. But still more does it call for careful consideration of the physical, mental, moral, and emotional characteristics of adolescent children, both as individuals and as groups.

8. Since the personal influence of the teachers on adolescents should be so important, since the school must count on this influence before all others, the teacher should advance with the pupils from grade to grade.

PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

With these principles and convictions the preliminary organization was developed.

Pupils in the St. Louis schools are promoted quarterly, so that there has been desirable flexibility in promotion rates as among individual pupils. In the junior high school this quarter-grade plan is continued, but the pupils in each quarter-grade are further subdivided into thirds according to ability in general school subjects. This division is based on the judgments of the elementary-school principals. These divisions are checked up immediately by the use of the Trabue completion test; hence any pupil left in the C section—that is, in the lower third—must have been placed there both by his elementary-school principal and by the Trabue tests.

This departure from uniformity of advancement is somewhat complicated at best. It gives rise to many unexpected problems; it calls for endless careful adjustments. But the salvation of a new democratically organized school is the presence of real problems, to the solution of which the faculty and students must address themselves.

This diagram may indicate the theoretical advancement of each section. As a rule, the C sections are given to the ablest teachers and the sections are kept small. Their progress is

made the unit; they are expected to do a quarter-grade's work in a quarter-year. Indeed a quarter-grade's work might almost be defined as that which a C section of twenty-five pupils can accomplish, with a sympathetic able teacher in ten school weeks.

PROGRESS RATES FOR SECTIONS A, B, AND C

Sec. A : $\frac{7-1-A}{\text{First quarter-year}}$: $\frac{7-2-A}{\text{Second quarter-year}}$: $\frac{7-3-A}{\text{Third quarter-year}}$: $\frac{7-4-A}{\text{Fourth quarter-year}}$: $\frac{8-1-A}{\text{Fifth quarter-year}}$: $\frac{8-2-A}{\text{Sixth quarter-year}}$: $\frac{8-3-A}{\text{Seventh quarter-year}}$:

Sec. B : $\frac{7-1-B}{\text{First quarter-year}}$: $\frac{7-2-B}{\text{Second quarter-year}}$: $\frac{7-3-B}{\text{Third quarter-year}}$: $\frac{7-4-B}{\text{Fourth quarter-year}}$: $\frac{8-1-B}{\text{Fifth quarter-year}}$: $\frac{8-2-B}{\text{Sixth quarter-year}}$: $\frac{8-3-B}{\text{Seventh quarter-year}}$:

Sec. C : $\frac{7-1-C}{\text{First quarter-year}}$: $\frac{7-2-C}{\text{Second quarter-year}}$: $\frac{7-3-C}{\text{Third quarter-year}}$: $\frac{7-4-C}{\text{Fourth quarter-year}}$: $\frac{8-1-C}{\text{Fifth quarter-year}}$:

The school day is made up of six periods, no teacher teaching more than five periods.

All seventh-grade teachers teach only four recitations. The fifth teaching period of the teachers is called the "advisory period"; and throughout the seventh grade all classes return every day to their rooms for an hour with the home-room teachers, with no regular work assigned.

In the eighth and ninth grades advisory periods come less frequently, but the teachers' responsibility is the same.

The seventh-grade curriculum is similar for all pupils. I say similar rather than identical, first, because latitude is left for each teacher, and to a more limited extent for each group, to vary the time allotments and choice of topics; secondly, because the intensity and extensiveness of treatment of each subject with an A section is much greater than with a C section.

Space will not permit a discussion of the content and method of the general curriculum, though these are very important elements in the general socialization of the school. But the fundamental step in performing the socialization is through the "advisory periods," and this term must be explained more fully.

During the seventh grade the pupils have five periods a week of English, five periods of social study (geography and history), five periods of arithmetic, two and a half periods of nature-study, two and a half periods of practical arts, five periods of drawing, music, and physical training, and five full periods with their advisers with no regular tasks. But during these advisory periods, from 150 to 200 hours during this grade, the adviser has his children with a sole task of teaching them how to become good citizens—intelligent, honest, earnest, vigorous, successful citizens—of the miniature democracy of which they are a part as well as of the larger social world beyond the walls of the school building.

There follows a partial list of activities in which the advisory groups engage:

1. A consideration of the ephobic oath, the boy scout pledge, etc., to arouse a desire to work as a group for a noble purpose.
2. Qualities necessary for a leader, a football captain, a student officer, a military officer, a committee member, a teacher or principal, are discussed, preliminary to choosing class and group officers.
3. The choice of group names, group mottoes, room decorations.
4. Matters of group discipline, group activities, auditorium exercises, group responsibility for music classes, group invitations to other groups to attend special occasions, intergroup contests, athletics, spelling-bees, debates.
5. Help in the study of lessons that are causing difficulty to the group, definite instruction in the use of books, in better methods and habits of study, and in planning the school and out-of-school hours.
6. The keeping of daily diaries and expense accounts.
7. The arousal of educational interests; educational, moral, and vocational guidance.
8. Reports of committees and of delegates to various student congresses and councils.
9. Questions of class and individual procedure; e.g., girls preceding boys in leaving rooms after recitations, methods of assisting the student officers in directing the passing through the halls.
10. Following the progress of the war, the messages and speeches of the President and other prominent men, analyzing war aims.

11. Planning Liberty Loan or Red Cross parades, group contributions of materials and labor in the infinite war activities.

12. Group pledges to conserve food, to spend not more than a certain amount for lunches.

No list could be exhaustive, for the activities multiply endlessly as a result of the children's own efforts. The teachers, as "members of gangs," lead only by suggestion and approval or disapproval. And the gang loyalty makes the teacher a far more powerful leader than he could be if he depended on his authority and the obedience of the children. The maturity and superior wisdom and greater experience of the teacher in comparison with that of the children assure the teacher their respect if he deserves it.

STUDENT ORGANIZATION

Two members of each advisory group are elected as delegates to the Grade Congress, which watches over the welfare and directs the activities of each grade; one member is elected to the Student Council, which legislates on and directs many of the activities affecting the whole school; and one girl is elected delegate to the Girls' Council, which looks after those activities that cannot well be considered by a council made up of both sexes. The faculty members of these organizations are appointed by the principal, but they keep in the background, offering suggestions only when something really unwise seems likely to be decided upon.

The second type of organization is based upon student activities and interests. The three or four nature-study and science clubs, the hiking clubs, and the camera clubs elect delegates to the Outing Congress; the mandolin club, the orchestra, the several glee clubs and choral clubs elect delegates to the Music Congress. The class athletic associations send delegates to the Athletic Council, and literary and civic societies—Forum, Senate, Current Topics Club, Agora, Civics Club, *Junior Life*, the Junior Red Cross, French Club, the

Spanish Club—send delegates to the Literary and Civic Congress.

The Student Council sends two student members and two faculty members to the Cabinet. From every other congress and council one faculty member and one student member are sent to the Cabinet, of which the principal is a member and which meets Wednesday afternoons of even-numbered weeks. On Wednesday afternoons of odd-numbered weeks the Student Council meets; of this the assistant principal is a member.

The Cabinet receives suggestions from all of its members, and delegates the duties and power to the organization which is to carry them out.

A concrete illustration may show how this works out. In March one advisory group raised the question of a parents' night to show our organization, buildings, and class procedure to our friends in the community. The advisory group instructed its delegates to the Student Council and to the Grade Congress to propose this at the next meeting of these bodies. Both the congress and the council discussed it and directed their delegates to make definite recommendations to the Cabinet. Here the varied suggestions as to time, nature of the occasion, the questions of who should be in charge, what permission would have to be obtained, etc., were discussed, and the whole matter was referred to the class congresses, with full power, but with the suggestion that as many groups as possible be given the privilege to volunteer assistance. The grade congresses elected a joint committee on arrangements which requested the student officers, the Girls' Council, the orchestra, the nature-study clubs, the School Gardens Club, and other organizations to take responsibility for tagging the guests, ushering them about the building, guiding the passing, arranging the entertainment, and infinite other tasks that presented themselves. Permission for using the building, requisitioning of extra chairs, placing of tables, arranging of

exhibitions, and all expenditures of money the joint committee accepted as its responsibility. Each advisory group and each recitation group were eager to show the parents how the new class methods worked.

Needless to say, with so many pupils with a direct stake in it, the parents' evening was a great success. It was estimated that 90 per cent of the pupils returned voluntarily to the evening session and that fully fifteen hundred guests were in attendance. In civics and history classes, particularly, the parents became so interested in hearing modern social and economics problems argued that they could not keep out of the discussion—they agreed, they disagreed, they offered information, they asked questions. The student chairman recognized them in turn and asked the pupil questioned to defend or explain his statement, or courteously thanked the guests for furnishing needed information. But this article is not a description of parents' night.

The societies and individuals to whom tasks were assigned reported back to the joint committee, which reported in turn to the grade congresses and to the Cabinet; thanks and congratulations were showered about. And then attention turned to something else—for we try to stress always things to be done, not what has already been accomplished.

Was it a very roundabout way to get a simple thing accomplished? The teachers could have directed a parents' night with much less fuss and with surely no more work, for they had in this case to advise and "head off" overambitious or unwise projects without number. But, after all, the reason for giving the parents' night was not so much to have a brilliant affair or a smoothly conducted meeting as it was to give the children an education in the way a democratic society should conduct such an affair—an education through actual practice and achievement.

The student organizations were organized in some cases on the initiative of groups of pupils, sometimes at the suggestions of teachers. The impulses giving rise to debating, current topic, dramatic, and musical societies were inherited from the senior high school. The Athletic Council also was traditional.

The student officers developed from the request of a few boys in one advisory group to be allowed to help the class administrator in handling the passing problem. This co-operation was so successful that it rapidly spread through the school and soon demanded co-ordination; so a Student Officers' Organization was formed with a committee of men faculty members associated with the students. The student officers generally take their work very seriously, and their authority is almost never abused and never questioned.

The Student Council developed spontaneously to conduct Red Cross and Liberty Loan drives. The plan of co-ordination of all student-teacher societies through a school cabinet was borrowed by the principal from an article in the *School Review*.

THE TEACHERS AND THE SOCIALIZATION PROCESS

It seems axiomatic that an autocratically organized faculty must be hampered in producing a pupil democracy. The first step, therefore, has been to make the teachers realize that they are safe in going ahead with their work independently, that honest differences of opinions with the principal will be respected and never arbitrarily overruled, provided—and this is an important provision—that the teachers can subscribe to the two fundamental principles for which the school stands. If they are temperamentally so constituted that they cannot believe that a school can be made safe for democracy and that a pupil democracy can be developed that will be safe for the school, then teacher and school profit by a transfer.

Loyalty to the school, to the school as the embodiment of an ideal, to the school as represented by a very human and

lovable faculty, as a body of beautiful, unspoiled, eager children—this loyalty and pride is carefully nurtured in the faculty. When I say that fully a third of the faculty was transferred to the junior high school without having been consulted and contrary to their personal preferences, that several of the teachers had never heard of such an institution as a junior high school, that not ten out of the first forty-five teachers had ever had experience in a school where children were allowed to make a school for themselves, it must be seen that this spirit of loyalty could not come at once. But we met and wrangled together, we laughed and ate ice-cream together, we danced and worked together, the active discordant spirits were removed, and before the end of the year there were left only the natural and desirable divergencies of opinions to be expected in a democracy.

The teachers more readily encourage this controlled pupil democracy because they themselves belong to a democratically organized faculty. The subject teachers of each grade have formed subcommittees on their subjects, which report to committees of the whole made up of all the teachers of the subject in the school. The principal has been chairman of the Social Studies Committee and *ex officio* member of the other subject committees. But within broad limits the teachers have worked out and taught their subjects with criticism and help, but not under orders from the office.

When one stops to think that, on account of the differentiated curricula, there have been developed at least four kinds of eighth-grade science, four kinds of mathematics, several types of art work, two kinds of commercial work, two of practical arts, according to the curriculum setting in which each is offered, that in some sections every child requires an individual curriculum, one realizes that unless the teachers themselves had worked out the curriculum the distinctions could never have been kept clear.

Too sudden a plunge into democracy would have been disastrous; it was essential that in the early organization there should be erected moorings to which the faculty and students could tie. And yet if situations demanding immediate solutions by the faculty and students were never allowed to rise, the self-activity of the school could never be aroused. It is an advantage that the halls should sometimes be congested, that recitations be delayed because pupils waste time in returning from shop, that auditorium periods be noisy, that some roughness should appear on the playground, if these difficulties will make students and teachers collectively take definite steps to surmount them. It is not desirable that the machine run so automatically that the need of collective activities never arises.

In the beginning, faculty meetings largely concerned themselves with matters of pupil administration, discipline, playgrounds, passing, tardiness, etc., but, as the student body became organized, matters of pupil administration more and more became questions for the faculty-student organizations, the student officers, the various councils, the clubs, and the advisory groups.

By the middle of the year questions of pupil administration were virtually tabooed at faculty meetings. Since that time these meetings have considered questions of method, of curriculum, of pupil progress, of directed study, of school interests, school marks, tests, scales and measurements of progress, of relative value of school subjects as bases of promotion, of the use of the school library, socialized recitations and group assignments, etc. The faculty meets as a seminar, the problem for the day is raised by the principal, the teacher in charge presents a paper with outline and bibliography, and on the blackboard are sometimes put two or three suggestive questions that serve to introduce a general discussion. In the progress of the discussion questions are often raised which suggest subjects for future faculty meetings.

The teachers develop the curricula in grade and intergrade subject committees, and the grade faculties meet from time to time to consider class questions under the leadership of the class administrators.

CONTROLLING SCHOOL SENTIMENT AS A FACTOR

The merest mention has been made of two of the most potent agents in making successful the efforts of the school—the auditorium periods and the school paper, *Junior Life*.

The seventh and the eighth grade each has an auditorium period one day a week. The ninth grade has its auditorium period every second week, alternating with advisory periods. The auditorium sessions are in charge of advisory groups in turn. No teacher or guest appears on the platform except on invitation and after introduction by the presiding student, generally the advisory-group president.

Here, as elsewhere, the experienced eye will recognize that the teachers have found a more effective way of developing and controlling school situations than by obtruding themselves into the foreground. Here, as elsewhere, we find the beautiful enthusiasm and school, class, and personal loyalties exploited as motive power to bring out the best contributions in the way of individual performance, of appreciation and encouragement, of tolerance, of good manners.

Through the auditorium sessions our children made direct contact with the outside community whose representatives came to speak, to listen, to observe, to join in spirit. Mayor and missionary, preacher and propagandist, consuls and collectors, from Atlantic and Pacific, even from Europe, they came; but most often our guests were neighbors who came at the invitation of the pupils. They were sometimes shocked, at first, that the principal was not in his office—he seldom is—or that no formal welcome had been prepared, but they were soon dissolved into complete accord. They were accepted into

membership. No one ever came who did not thereafter feel in a very real sense that he belonged, that he had been taken into the clan.

Junior Life, the school paper, was developed independently by a group of teachers and pupils and popularized by advertising until the school accepted and supported it generously. The editorial and reportorial staff was broadened and developed gradually until the whole school was represented. Contributions poured in and bade fair to swamp the staff. Gradually the teacher-editors withdrew from active control and kept up only friendly oversight and criticism.

The paper is above all things a school paper. The stories, reports, and editorials are those we expect from eager, earnest, adolescent boys and girls. But the setting of high but attainable ideals by the pupils for themselves has a desirable influence, not only on English expression, but on the character of contributions that are offered.

The prime advantage of both auditorium exercises and the school paper is that through the popularizing of these agencies we can help the pupils to control and elevate their own personal and group ideals of speech and action, of attitude and judgment. And this is done with no taint of priggishness on the part of the children.

SUMMARY

The fundamental aim of the junior high school is to educate all thirteen- to fifteen-year-old children of the community. It follows that it must receive them all and must retain them, else it cannot educate them; that it must offer each child that kind and quantity of educational opportunity to which he can be stimulated to respond; that it shall offer opportunities not only to master the subject-matter of the curriculum, but that it shall give the young citizens practice in responding to typical experiences for democracy.

The junior high school is, in the broadest sense, an experimental institution; the faculty, supervisors, and children are experimenters as well as the material experimented upon. It is democracy in process!